

II. BACKGROUND RESEARCH

A. General Overview

Sussex is the largest of Delaware's three counties, containing about 94 square miles, and was the first to be settled by Europeans. In 1659, the Dutch established a blockhouse, called Company's Fort, at Hoerenkil, later Lewes (Hancock 1976:14). The outpost expanded to include a small agricultural settlement under the Mennonite leadership of Cornelius Plockhoy in the early 1660s. The Anglo-Dutch war interrupted the growth of the fledgling colony when Sir Robert Carr occupied New Amstel and Hoerenkil and confiscated all of the possessions of Plockhoy's community. Plockhoy later moved on to Germantown but some of his followers remained in Sussex County where they swore allegiance to the English crown (Hancock 1976:14-15).

The "three counties" that became Delaware were contested by English proprietors as well as by rivaling English and Dutch imperial claims. No sooner had the English supplanted the Dutch than Lord Baltimore, proprietor of Maryland, challenged the claim of the Duke of York. In 1672, Captain Thomas Jones led raids on Hoerenkil on behalf of the Maryland proprietor, forcing settlers to swear allegiance to Lord Baltimore or suffer imprisonment and confiscation of their property. In the meantime, the Dutch fleet sailed into New York harbor in July 1673 and repossessed the city and the settlements on the Delaware. Maryland took advantage of the confusion to tighten its hold on Hoerenkil. Thomas Howell, acting under commission to Lord Baltimore, led another raid on the settlement on the grounds that the inhabitants had taken the oath of allegiance to the Dutch. A second raid led by Howell resulted in destruction of the settlement except for a single barn (Hancock 1976:15-16).

Peace between England and Holland was restored in 1676 and Holland ceded its possessions in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware to England. Lord Baltimore continued to issue competing patents to land in what became Sussex County, known in Maryland as Somerset County; Governor Lovelace of New York, acting on behalf of the Duke of York, also issued patents to land in the county. Finally, in 1682, the three counties were confirmed to William Penn of Pennsylvania. This seems to have brought the contests among the contending proprietors to an end (Hancock 1976:17-18). Penn changed Somerset County's name to Sussex, organized a government, and instituted the system of hundreds.

During the seventeenth century, Sussex County was a rugged wilderness dominated by forests and swamps. Transportation was limited to navigable waterways like the Mispillion River, Cedar Creek, and Indian River Inlet. Most of the early settlement occurred along these routes (Hancock 1976:20). By 1700, the county is believed to have contained about 1,000 persons. With Lewes as the only town and the commercial and administrative center of the county, settlement dispersed along the Indian River, Mispillion River, and Cedar Creek. Most families engaged in agriculture, with tobacco, corn, wheat, and rye as the principal crops. As there were few roads, residents relied primarily on water transport (Hancock 1976:20-21). Benjamin Eastburn's map of 1737 suggests that settlement was

still fairly thin in Sussex County in the early eighteenth century although roads connected the major settlements and the Indian River appears to have been navigable by small vessels about 10 miles inland (Munroe and Dann 1975:225).

Lewes prospered as a maritime, commercial, and administrative center, but the gradual growth of western settlements led to agitation in the so-called back country for a county seat that was more centrally located. In addition to agriculture, bog iron deposits and processing sites had led to some economic development west of the original coastal settlements along the headwaters of the Nanticoke River after 1763. By 1763, Jonathan Vaughn and other entrepreneurs from Chester County, Pennsylvania, had established the Deep Creek Iron Works, a complex of forges and foundries located about seven miles northwest of the present site of Georgetown. The complex was supported by a 5,000-acre plantation, a system of roads, and a stone wharf on Deep Creek which afforded access to ocean-going vessels (Tunnell 1955:87-88). Other furnaces and forges in the area included Unity Forge, located three miles above Concord (the site of the Deep Creek Iron Works), and Collins Forge, also called Gravelly Delight, on Gravelly Branch. Operated successively by Captain John Collins, his son Governor John Collins, and his grandson Theophilus Collins, Gravelly Delight was the last of the Sussex County iron works to manufacture iron using the traditional blast technology. It shut down some time in the 1850s (Hancock 1976:62; Tunnell 1955:88).

Although iron resources contributed to the economic development of the area, the nature of the early iron industry, particularly its requirements for vast quantities of timber from which to manufacture charcoal, did not stimulate rapid increase in population. The terrain in the vicinity of Georgetown was low and swampy and the land was held in large tracts by predominantly absentee landholders, further discouraging rapid settlement by farmers (Wade 1975:5). The relatively desolate swamps in the area afforded refuge to Tories during the Black Camp Rebellion of 1780. Most of the activity during the War for Independence affected the ports along the Delaware. However, insurrectionists mainly from Cedar Creek and Slaughter Neck Hundred led an uprising in 1780, having established their headquarters in a swamp about six miles north of Georgetown. Kent County militia dispersed the uprising, which involved about 400 men. The eight leaders were condemned to death for treason but pardoned in November 1780 (Hancock 1976:43-44).

Among the grievances that had become intertwined with economic complaints during the Revolutionary years was the continued sense of political isolation that the back country had felt in the years leading up to the war. This was finally resolved in 1791 when Georgetown was surveyed in John Pettijohn's field "sixteen miles from anywhere," and designated the county seat (Wade 1975:5). In roughly the same period but for different reasons, Parson Sydenham Thorne erected a mill on Mispillion River in 1787 and together with Joseph Oliver, the local landowner, encouraged people to take up lots in the newly surveyed town of Milford. Oliver had occupied land in this area since 1773 when he bought a portion of Saw Mill Range, a 1,730-acre tract granted to Henry Bowman in 1680. Prior to constructing the mill, Oliver had run a store and shipped local farmers' produce to market on his own vessels (Milford's Founding and Founders 1987). In 1791, Thorne established an Episcopal Church in Milford, eventually shifting the religious center from an older church located three miles west of the fledgling town (Hancock 1976:57-58).

Except for Georgetown, whose genesis was essentially political, a series of small towns in the county followed a morphology similar to Milford's: houses clustered around gristmills and sawmills, ports and fords, followed by schools, churches, post offices, and other industries (Hancock 1976:56). What frequently began as small transportation hubs with waterpower appropriate for milling thus combined central-place services for the outlying farmers with transportation and industrial capability. Fleatown, later renamed Federalsburg, was initially a small crossroads community defined by two taverns that served the stagecoaches. The advent of the railroad, however, precipitated the slow decline of the taverns and then the village (Conrad 1908:695). Other small towns in Sussex County dating to this period include Seaford (1799), Laurel (1802), Bethel (1800), Dagsborough (ca. 1780), Frankford (1808), Selbyville (1842), Milton (1807), and Millsboro (1809) (Hancock 1976:58-59).

Agriculture continued as the predominant economic activity throughout the nineteenth and on into the twentieth century. Corn had been the principal crop cultivated in Sussex County during the Colonial period and retained its primacy during the first half of the nineteenth century, followed by wheat and other crops. Farmers appear to have practiced a mix of relatively small-scale subsistence/commercial agriculture (Hancock 1976:59). Wheat prices were initially inflated by European demand during the Napoleonic Wars, but after 1819 this market vanished, leaving economic depression in its place. Migration to new lands further west accentuated the depression and agriculture stagnated until about 1830. Thereafter, urban demand for fruits, vegetables, and dairy products slowly stimulated the state's agricultural economy, assisted by improved agricultural techniques that enhanced farm productivity (Baker 1947:I:374). This transition to farming targeted toward the domestic urban market was felt first in New Castle County, but with the growth of the rail system began to spread to Sussex County by the eve of the Civil War (Baker 1947:I:376). Farmers in Sussex County also experimented with raising silk cocoons and mulberry trees in the 1830s and 1840s, encouraged, no doubt, by a state bounty on the production of cocoons and silk in 1837 (Hancock 1976:30).

The middle decades of the nineteenth century were notable for the tremendous expansion in the cultivation of peaches. Peaches were introduced into the state by Isaac Reeves of New Jersey in 1832. New Castle County was initially the center of peach cultivation, but by the 1850s, with the construction of the railroad, peach orchards had spread to lower Delaware (Baker 1947:I:382; Hancock 1976:60-61). The Delaware Railroad reached the Maryland border at Delmar in 1859. The Delaware, Maryland and Virginia Railroad, which was extended from Harrington east to Milford and then south through Ellendale to Georgetown in 1869, encouraged not only cultivation of more perishable, market crops but also the establishment of processing plants and canneries in the town (Delaware Division of the Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Wilmington Railroad 1914; Wade 1975:35).

By the eve of the Civil War, the statewide transition away from grain cultivation had begun but was far from complete. Delaware was still heavily invested in wheat and corn. The most valuable farms and those with the greatest concentration in orchard products, market gardens, and dairying were located primarily in New Castle County (Baker 1947:I:383). Sussex County lagged behind New Castle in the shift to new crops, and unlike Kent and New Castle counties where slavery was a dying

institution, Sussex contained more than half of the state's slave population (Hancock 1976:64). The largest slave owner in the county on the eve of the war was Benjamin Burton of Indian Creek Hundred, owner of 28 slaves. Burton was the exception, rather than the rule; most slaves augmented relatively modest farm households where they worked as domestic servants or field laborers (Hancock 1976:65).

Sectional tensions were high in the county during the war, and residents of Broad Creek Hundred openly celebrated Confederate victories. Most people were unenthusiastic about the proposed compensated emancipation of slaves in 1861, and the Democrats carried the county in the 1862 elections. In economic terms, however, the war was beneficial for the county, leading to higher prices for agricultural commodities and an expansion in shipbuilding facilities in both Milford and Milton (Hancock 1976:82-84).

The economic promise implicit in the extension of the railroad prior to 1860 became apparent in the decades following the war. Population growth in Sussex County was slow but steady, tourism to shore resorts increased, and by 1900, the county was the state leader in the production of peaches, blackberries, and strawberries. Corn was still the leading crop, as it had been since the Colonial period, and Sussex County farmers derived additional income from livestock, poultry, and dairying (Hancock 1976:88-89). The railroads were responsible for other forms of development as well. The formation of the towns of Lincoln and Ellendale, surveyed in 1867, constituted a direct response to access to the railroad (Robinson 1976:62). In 1875, the Fruit Preserving Company, a cannery, was established in Georgetown near the railroad depot, marking an industrial response not only to improved transport facilities but also to the transition in local agriculture (Wade 1975:35). In 1876, the Georgetown Packing Company was organized (Wade 1975:41). Industry in Georgetown expanded in the 1880s under the leadership of Charles H. Treat. Treat acquired the Fruit Preserving Company in 1883 and began to manufacture various wooden novelties and dishes. In 1885, Treat opened a second plant, which manufactured baskets, barrels, casks, lumber, and scroll-saws and jig-saws. The opening of Treat's factories was soon followed by the establishment of several new canneries, a steam sawmill, and expanded consumer services, from insurance to ice-cream parlors (Wade 1975:41-42). Not all functions were concentrated in the towns and villages, however. Churches and schools were distributed across the landscape where they were easily accessible to the dispersed rural population.

Although Sussex County was the center of Delaware's peach industry in 1890, peach culture in the state was on the wane by 1900, partly as a result of a disease that affected the peach trees, the cause of which was never identified (Baker 1947:I:385-386). At the turn of the century and continuing up to World War II, corn and wheat were still important crops, as were strawberries, tomatoes, lima beans, green peas, snap beans, cantaloupes, asparagus, watermelons, cucumbers, and sweet corn, particularly in the southern part of the state (Baker 1947:I:394). The state highway program, inaugurated in 1920, greatly stimulated dairying and egg sales in Sussex County in the period following World War I (Baker 1947:I:397, 401).

The principal innovation in twentieth-century agriculture was the expansion in the raising of broilers, that is, young birds weighing less than two and one-half pounds. The modern industry is associated with the experiments of Mrs. Wilmer Steele of Ocean View, Sussex County, with raising and marketing chicks in 1923. By 1928, broiler production had spread across Sussex County and into Kent and New Castle. The Steeles pioneered the timing of raising fowl, beginning the broods in February, as well as the organization and sizes of the houses. The 2,000-bird unit, the standard in 1930, had by 1940 become considered a "backyard" flock, capable of being handled as a part-time activity (Baker 1947:I:402). The expansion in the production and marketing of broilers simultaneously led to an expansion in hatcheries and hatching-egg production as well as the processing, distribution, and retailing of feed (Baker 1947:I:403, 404). The broilers had initially been delivered live to urban markets; demand among New York City's burgeoning Jewish population was particularly strong. In 1938, Jack Udel established the first dressing plant in Frankford, Sussex County, which slaughtered and dressed the birds and then shipped them to retail outlets (Baker 1947:I:405).

Since 1920, Sussex County has grown enormously, although it retains its agricultural basis. In 1970, 85 percent of the residents were classified as rural, and more than one-half of Delaware's farms and crop land were contained in the county (Hancock 1976:101). Corn has remained an important crop, but the cultivation of soybeans together with corn and poultry has supplanted the growing of labor-intensive fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes, lima beans, peas, and strawberries. Many canneries and processing plants shut down or were replaced by grain elevators, broiler houses, and poultry-processing plants (Hancock 1976:100). In recent years Vlastic Foods has maintained a food-processing plant in Millsboro and Draper Foods has employed about 1,000 people at a vegetable packing plant in Milton. In addition to food packing and processing, industries in the county produce chemicals, instruments, nylon, fertilizer, textiles, and electronics (Hancock 1976:103).

B. Project Area History

1. Warren Mill Site

The following narrative is largely based on Richard Carter's *The History of Betts Pond and Its Mills* (1980). The Warren Mill site is located along the northern shore of Betts Pond, just west of the town of Millsboro. As its name suggests, Millsboro developed as a result of milling activities during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Indian River and Fishing Creek provided excellent waterpowered sources which attracted milling entrepreneurs. The town itself began around a gristmill which Elisha Dickerson built on the north shore of the Indian River in 1792. Soon, small homes and stores were built around the mill. The village was first known as Rock Hole, after the rockfish that were numerous in the river near the town site (Hancock 1976:52). Other mills began operating around the area at this time, including the Engle Gristmill (in 1798) and Killock's Mill (date unknown). With this distinction as a milling center, the town changed its name to Millsboro around 1806 (Hudson 1975:10-11).

The earliest known mill in the area was the Burton Mill, constructed by Benjamin Burton, Sr. in 1773 at the same site which presently contains the Warren Mill (Hudson 1975:11). Benjamin Burton, Sr. (1718-1783) was not only a mill owner, but a prominent planter and merchant who owned much of the land in and around Millsboro. He was also a local figure involved in the early stages of the Revolution, having served as a Sussex County delegate to the Delaware meeting of the "Boston Relief Committee," which became one of the first steps taken by Delaware to make a defiant stance for Independence. Despite his participation as a representative of the county in early Revolutionary activities, it is still not known for certain if Burton himself was a devout patriot or had remained more loyal toward the crown. However, it is obvious that he was a significant figure in the county, partly because of his family heritage (Carter 1980:2).

The Burtons were one of the founding families of Sussex County. Benjamin's father, Woolsey Burton I, founded the White House Plantation in Indian River Hundred. Benjamin's grandfather, William Burton, was one of the earliest landowners in the county, acquiring land in as early as 1677. By the eighteenth century, the Burton family was very large, most members becoming major landowners in what is today Millsboro. Many family members had settled along both sides of the Indian River and along Rehoboth Bay by this time as well (Carter 1980:2).

Benjamin Burton constructed his mill on land he purchased along Fishing Creek, just northwest of Millsboro. His "mill seat" (the mill complex as a whole) included a dam, which controlled the flow of water powering the mill and created the millpond, along with the mill itself. Burton's mill was undoubtedly similar to others in the area, being a wood-frame structure, two to three stories in height, constructed on a sturdy brick foundation. Such size was required to support the waterwheel that powered the mechanisms within the building (Carter 1980:4-5).

Following Benjamin's death in 1783, the mill passed onto his heirs. First, his son, Joseph Burton, acquired the mill and mill seat, but he died without heirs shortly after his father. The property then passed on to Benjamin's grandson, Benjamin Burton II, son of Benjamin I's eldest son Woolsey. It is in Woolsey's will that the identity of the particular type of mill operated by the Burtons comes to light for the first time. In his will, Woolsey identifies a particular stream on which, "my son Benjamin's sawmill is located." Because the document makes no mention of an additional gristmill on the property, it can be assumed that the sawmill is the only mill owned by Benjamin II at this time and was the same one constructed by his grandfather. It must be noted, however, that waterpowered mill buildings often have a very short life span. The strain placed on the building by the waterpowered wheels was often tremendous, wearing out the building in a relatively short period of time. Since repairs could be very costly, a new building was usually erected to replace the earlier structure. In addition, thick layers of sawdust and flour often clung to the interiors of the building, creating a very real threat of fire. Therefore, the possibility is not entirely unlikely that either of the Benjamin Burtons or Joseph Burton constructed a gristmill on the property which was later destroyed (Carter 1980:5).

Like his grandfather, Benjamin Burton II became a prominent local resident as a result of other activities not related to the mill. During the War of 1812, he led a local militia company in the

defense of Lewes, which was attacked by the British in 1813. He was also a prominent merchant and served on the board of directors for the Georgetown branch of the Farmers Bank of Delaware (Carter 1980:5).

Benjamin II died in 1824, and since he had no children of his own, he left the mill property to a surviving brother, Mier, and a nephew, who was known by his contemporaries as Benjamin Burton of Daniel, to separate his identity from the various other Benjamin Burtons. Benjamin of Daniel was only 14 years old when he acquired one-half ownership of the Burton mill site. During his lifetime he prospered as a farmer, owning a 1,000-acre plantation, located southwest of Millsboro, along with many slave laborers. Like many other large farms in Sussex county at this time, this plantation constituted a small village which included the mansion house, barns, stables, granaries, sheds, storehouses, milk houses, and servant and slave quarters. The plantation was so large that the Rae and Price 1850 Map of Delaware refers to it as Burtonsville (Carter 1980:6).

In 1838, Mier Burton died, leaving his estate to be divided among his four sons. Ownership of his interest in the mill seat took several years to be sorted out by the courts and fee acquisition. Eventually, John Mier Burton purchased Mier's one-half interest of the mill seat in 1860 for \$1,300. The records of the legal battle over the mill seat provided further documentation as to the condition of the property at this time. The Sussex County Chancery Court Docket details the partitioning of Mier Burton's estate, which required conducting a survey of the mill seat. The 1840 survey map shows the property at this time as containing both a gristmill and a sawmill (Figure 3). The map depicts the gristmill as a three-story wood-frame building with a gable roof; the sawmill appears to be a two-story building with a gable roof (Carter 1980:6).

Between 1875 and 1888, ownership of the Betts Pond mills changed hands again. John Mier Burton died in 1875, and his widow Lavia Burton sold their interest in the mill seat to Joseph B. Betts for \$800. Benjamin Burton of Daniel continued to own the other half interest in the mill site until his death in 1888. Upon his death, Benjamin of Daniel's interest in the mill site was sold at a public auction to settle his estate. It was Benjamin's younger brother, Peter Robinson Burton, who bought the property for just \$152. In the following year, Peter Robinson Burton purchased the other half of the mill site from Joseph B. Betts for about the same amount (Carter 1980:7).

The substantial depreciation in the value of the mill site after 1875 suggests that improvements to the property, such as mill buildings, were removed or destroyed. In 1860, John Mier Burton purchased one-half interest in the entire site for \$1,300. In 1875, this same percentage of the property sold for \$800, and by 1888 the entire property was purchased for about \$304. A likely explanation for this is that both mills were either destroyed by fire or deliberately demolished by 1888 (Carter 1980:7).

Peter Robinson Burton died only three years after he acquired sole title to the property, and upon his death, the property was sold to Charles B. Houston for only \$110. Houston never bothered to do anything with the property and sold it in 1896 for \$100 to Joseph E. Betts, a relative of previous owner Joseph B. Betts. Betts did rebuild the mill. Just two years after he sold the property to

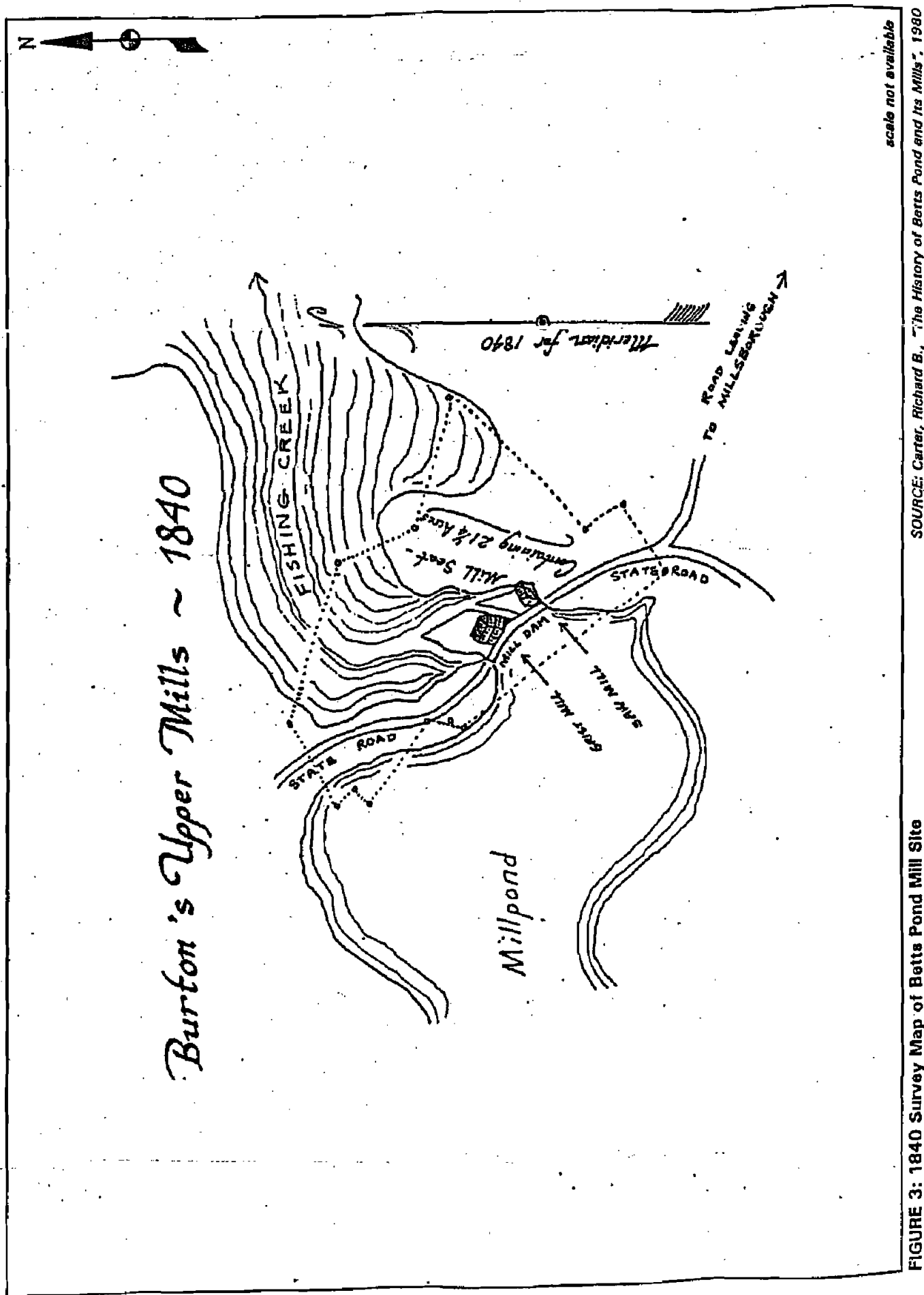


FIGURE 3: 1840 Survey Map of Betts Pond Mill Site

SOURCE: Carter, Richard B., "The History of Betts Pond and Its Mills", 1980

Alexander West in 1908 for an undisclosed sum, the property was assessed for \$1,300. Two years later, West sold the millpond, water rights, and mill to John C. Betts for that same amount. John Betts was related to both Joseph B. and Joseph E. Betts who both previously owned the mill site. He also would be the last member of this family, after which Betts Pond is named, to own the mill. In 1922, Betts sold the property to Wilford B. Warren and Charles H. Peck. The following year, Warren bought out Peck and became the sole owner of the mill (Carter 1980:8).

At the time that Warren became sole owner of the property, it included at least a gristmill, mill dams, and a granary. The 1918 USGS *Millsboro* quadrangle shows two structures on the property. One is a gristmill that is situated on the same site as the present mill on the property (Norton 1978:3). A granary is shown attached to or near the gristmill. Such a building was a typical feature associated with gristmills, which often needed separate buildings to store and protect grain products from the ravages of animals and nature. The granary at the mill on Betts Pond was constructed by one of the previous owners during the late nineteenth/early twentieth century (Ralph Warren, personal communication 1999). The identity of the second structure depicted on the 1918 USGS map is uncertain. This building was located about 300 feet north of the Warren Mill, on or near the site where a gristmill was situated in the 1840 survey of the property. It is unlikely that this building was the granary, as it was located a considerable distance from the mill that was located on the property at that time.

The gristmill burned in 1924, and in 1929 Warren constructed the building that is presently located on the property. The new gristmill, a two-story building that operated on a waterpowered turbine system, was constructed on the same site as the burnt gristmill. It was also during or shortly before this time that the granary was moved to its present location on the south side of Route 326, opposite the mill, and converted into a residence for the Warren family (Roland Warren, personal communication 1999). Warren operated the present mill until the mid-1940s, when all milling operations on the property permanently ceased. Wilford Warren's descendants still own the property.

2. Intersection of Routes 26 and 17

The Beers 1868 map shows that by this time Route 26 was already established as a public road but Route 17 had not been laid out yet. The nearest town to the project area was Blackwater, which consisted of about 20 homes and is today known as Clarksville (Beers 1868: *Baltimore* map). The *Rehoboth* quadrangle of 1918 shows that by the early twentieth century, Route 17 was laid out with three structures located at its intersection with Route 26 (Figure 4). These maps further show that the setting of the intersection at this time was predominantly rural as sparse development existed along both roads outside of Clarksville, Millville, and the other small towns located nearby (USGS 1918b and 1928). This was consistent with much of Sussex County which was dominated by agriculture well into the twentieth century. With the increase in the use of the automobile and improvements to both highways, the intersection took on its more suburban character after 1950.



FIGURE 4: 1918 Map Showing Intersection of Routes 26 and 17 Project Area

SOURCE: USGS 15 Minute Series, Rehoboth, DE Quadrangle 1918